

Jan Berger



Jan Berger is a retired business owner with a penchant for the arts, music, theatre and a love (and a growing collection of) fine wine. Jan discovered the joy of reading with children in some of his local schools ten years ago and shares with us why he enjoys it, why he feels it's important to get involved and what benefits it brings to him and the children he reads with.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN VOLUNTEERING?

Rosie (my wife) found an advertisement in our local paper to say they were recruiting volunteers to go into primary schools. At that time, I was indulging my love of the arts regularly, going to lunchtime recitals and talks on the arts, and I guess she thought, "This is all very well and good you going out every lunchtime" (I'm exaggerating, it wasn't every lunchtime) "But, going every single day doing all these indulgent things, would you like to consider it"? I thought for a day or three and it seemed to me that it was worth investigating.

I had a privileged background and education. We live in the borough of Hillingdon; a very diverse borough. There are parts of the borough where the socioeconomic grouping is struggling, let's put it that way. They struggle economically. They struggle in all aspects of their lives. Many immigrants are trying their best to educate their children and to give themselves and their children a better life. So, I thought I would investigate, so I applied and was invited to an interview. It was all very formal. I hadn't been interviewed since I was in the 6th form a hundred years ago. Essentially they said, "If you're interested, obviously we're so keen to have volunteers. If you can write your name and you're warm to the touch, you're in". It was as complex and as taxing as ... no I am making light of it.... There was a serious conversation about motivation and so forth. In June/July of that year, in advance of the autumn term 2010, they offered some training courses which I attended.

The organisation was called – in those days – Volunteer Reading Help (the name changed to Beanstalk in 2013). It had been founded in 1973 by a woman called Susan Belgrave, an educationalist. In the early '70's she had been in Harlem, New York, and she saw this wonderful scheme where underprivileged children were being encouraged to try and get a better life for themselves by being able to read. She was so impressed by this scheme, she came back and started this charity. So started the September term and I got my packed lunch, my tuck-box, my spending money and my apple and off I trudged. Full of trepidation, but scared of two things actually. One was obviously "how are the children going to react?" This strange and – in their eyes – old bloke turning up. But, more importantly I was concerned about how the teaching staff would accept me. "Here is this intruder, he's not trained, what does he know about anything?"

Anyway, I arrived and I was told I would be allocated year five and six. They said this particular year five was difficult, they needed help. And year six because, obviously, it's the year before transition/SATS and it's an important year. I was allocated two children



**THE ROLE THAT
WE
VOLUNTEERS
CAN OFFER IS
SOME SORT OF
ROLE MODEL
WHICH I THINK
IS VERY
IMPORTANT,
PARTICULARLY
FOR BOYS.**

from each year and it was a twice a week commitment. Either all morning or all afternoon. Essentially you were with the children for 30 minutes maximum, on a one-to-one basis. I was introduced to the children and everything was wonderful; they enjoyed it enormously. For one principal reason - they were able to leave the classroom without having been thrown out of the classroom. This for them was a novel departure from the room. Usually it's "You! Out", and in this case it was "Would you like to go with Jan and do some reading"?

I established quite quickly several important factors for me. One is that the children I was working with all spoke English. Some of them heavily accented, but they spoke English. They didn't necessarily speak English at home. They might have spoken language one with parents and language two with grandparents. And the other thing that became apparent quite quickly, because of the conversations that the children had with me, is that there was a lack of a male role model in their lives. For the vast majority of children that I saw then, and having continued to see over the 10 years I have been doing it, live with a single mum. So, there is a biological dad somewhere, but there is no connection with him. So, I think that the role that we volunteers can offer – and sadly there aren't sufficient men volunteering – I will come to that in a moment, is some sort of role model which I think is very important, particularly for boys.

There was one boy I read with who had family issues at home, and played a lot of video games (Black Ops in his particular case) to keep himself occupied, and found reading/ words too much. "You know Mr Jan", he said after our year of reading together was ending, "the trouble with reading, it's words, they do my head in, so I don't think I'm going to bother any more". What I tried to do with him, and I've tried to do subsequently, particularly with boys, is to write a very simple story, nothing of any literary quality at all, but introduce their name into the story and base it on a subject that interests them. This boy, apart from Black Ops, also happened to like to play football because he wanted to be a great footballer. So, I wrote little stories in simple words where he is the star player in this team. I was delighted to see his enthusiasm, because he could read his name and he could eventually get this simple story together. He felt very pleased and to get a little enthusiasm out of him was, for me, a great achievement.

With the girls it was easier. They brought books, or the books that I brought were of interest to them. They then would sit down and read quite happily for about ten or fifteen minutes. We would then stop and talk about what they had been reading about. What came to light quickly was that they were able to identify the words on the page, but they had very little comprehension contextually. So, if I would say, "what happened to Janet when she went on the bus"? And, it was quite clear in the story that Janet took out a packet of sweets and offered it to her friend. They had no idea what Janet was doing on the bus. They had read "Janet went on the bus", so the words were going in, but the comprehension wasn't there. The analogy I was told to best describe this is of the plate spinner in the circus. In the one hand the plate is spinning and that is identifying the words on the page, and the second plate, which is also trying to spin, is





comprehension. But the first plate, the identifying of the words and getting them into their head, is taking them so long that that second plate is spinning slower and slower. And eventually the comprehension falls off the edge of the page, and they have got no idea what they're reading.

This was year six which meant that SATS were not that far away, where they have to read three short stories and answers about thirty-odd questions. This terrified them. The prospect that they would have sufficient time to read all of it. But they were really very concerned about that. So, I tried to do as many revision papers with them in that particular period in the hope that they would get the hang of it. I shared with them some techniques to approach the test which usually worked and I was delighted that they felt a little bit more confident that they approached this alien text in a way they were ready to cope with.

The other notable memory for me was one particular little girl who was a Somali immigrant. The family had high aspirations for her and obviously worked closely with her at home. She was reading quite well and, as the months progressed, conversations were around various subject matters. Most of the children would talk about what was happening at school or, if they volunteered to tell me something that was troubling them, I would listen like an old uncle. Without being judgemental or offering any sort of opinion. She told me she had decided she was going to become a great actress. And this appeals to me because I love going to the theatre. So, I said, "Okay what have you in mind"? And she said, "Well, I've been to a children's show, my parents took me and this is what I want to do". I said, "Okay, I've got a great idea".

I had just been to see a remarkable performance given by a great actor, Simon Callow. He was doing a one person show on William Shakespeare. He took the life of Shakespeare, with the various characters, chronologically as Shakespeare wrote the plays, and he intermingles characters from the plays in Shakespeare's life. One of the most famous speeches of course is "All the world's a stage and they have their exits and entrances". And, as it happens, it was printed in the programme, so I brought the programme in the next day. I said, "This is a play called As You Like It by William Shakespeare and there is this wonderful speech that ... should we do it together"? "Let's pretend you're auditioning for this play and I am going to be the director" (because I am a frustrated theatre director) "And, I want you to project to me. Pretend I am at the back of the theatre and it's a huge auditorium and everybody wants to hear what you say, because it's so important."

At the end of term, she stood up without the book and she recited the first four lines from memory with expression and with enthusiasm. It was wonderful. It was absolutely amazing and like an old so and so, I sat there at the back of the seats with tears rolling down my cheeks. I happened to meet her mother at the school one day and she said "Are you Mr Jan"? and I said "Yes, why"? And she said "I just want to thank you. She has so grown during this year in her reading skills" which I was so grateful to hear.



THEY HAVE
SOMEONE ELSE
COMING
ALONG WHO IS
INTERESTED IN
HEARING
WHAT'S GOING
ON WITH
THEM.

I was then asked to take on another school which I was very happy to do. The second school was only a mile away from the first, but the difference is like night and day. The school is run differently. The school's parental input was far higher than the other school. I was allocated year one. So I thought "here we go!", having 30-something year old daughters, it's been a long time since I was changing nappies and looking after very little ones. But I said I would give it a go. It was of course a completely different experience. It was wonderful because they were enthusiastic, although I am bit fed up with Biff and Chip books, I have to tell you. Anyway, their expressions and the things they tell you, it was a real joy and so that progressed and I continued that up until this last term (before Covid of course). I have still kept the same schools. I have seen a transition of children moving from year ones up to year sixes and it's been a very enriching experience. It has been an experience that makes me more aware of, even though I was aware on the periphery by reading the press and seeing current affair programmes on television, the state education system in this country. How it is by postcode.

The Beanstalk Charity decided to merge with Coram. I found the bureaucracy that came with the big charity a little cumbersome. So I made the decision to resign from Beanstalk and I approached both schools and asked them whether they would be happy to continue the arrangement that we had. They both welcomed that idea and that's where we've been for the last one and a half academic years. They've worked with me for a number of years anyway and so have seen from the assessments that they've done with the children I've worked with, that there has been a degree of progress, which is always very gratifying to hear, that it's not a complete waste of time and that with some, the enthusiasm has been enormous. I could see the progress. Not necessarily from week to week, but certainly termly. The books that they brought and the ideas and the comprehension of these simple stories, has become clearer. So, when will I go back? I hope for the spring term. I am certainly going to go back, even if I have to go in full PPE outfit and look like Frankenstein walking in there and terrify the children.

DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE? DO YOU THINK THE CHILDREN BENEFIT?

Yes. I feel that it's time well spent and, without trying to sound arrogant, I think it's important. It is important to them that someone outside the home shows additional interest in them, apart from the staff of course. That they have someone else coming along who is interested in hearing what's going on with them and how their reading is progressing. I think that's very important because as I said earlier, many of them, when they get home don't speak English and if they even if they do, or if they're "white English" a lot of the time their families don't show interest in what they're doing, and in some cases whether they get a meal.



IT HAS
ENRICHED ME
ENOORMOUSLY
AND, MOST
IMPORTANTLY,
IT'S MADE ME
FAR MORE
AWARE OF THE
NEEDS IN THE
COMMUNITY
AND HOW
PERHAPS I, AND
OTHERS WHO
ARE SIMILARLY
PLACED, CAN
CONTRIBUTE.

WHO WOULD BE SUITABLE TO DO READING IN SCHOOLS?

Absolutely anyone that felt that they had the time to go into the school. And if possible it would be fantastic to get more men involved. We used to have get-togethers for the volunteers twice a year and lack of men was obvious from these meetings. It really never changed throughout the years – there would be a room filled with multi-ethnic, across the ages, women and four blokes, and that saddened me. That they found it so difficult to recruit blokes, which is a pity as so many of the children could benefit from a male role model.

IF SOMEBODY WANTED TO GET INVOLVED AS YOU DID, HOW WOULD YOU SUGGEST THAT THEY DO IT?

The format now with Coram Beanstalk is that you have three children for twenty minutes each. It's only an hour. If you can give a couple of hours a week they would be very grateful for volunteers. You can find more information on their website. www.beanstalkcharity.org.uk. There are also local charitable organisations that organise reading in school programmes which you should be able to find online.

WHAT DO YOU THINK VOLUNTEERING GAVE YOU?

It's given me an enormous amount of joy to see small children progress where I feel they wouldn't otherwise have progressed due to the lack of parental input. So, from that point of view, it's been really rewarding. It's been a happy experience. It's been interesting talking with the teaching staff who, as I said at the beginning of our conversation, I was overwhelmed by the manner in which I was welcomed by. I think that welcome from the teaching staff in itself is very rewarding and it gives you the impetus and gives you ... it charges you up to go in, confront all the problems that may suddenly occur.

It's been uplifting for me, it's added a new dimension to my life because, having adult children and only relatively recently, that is to say, in the last five years, grandchildren. Not having that degree of parental input any longer, to start all over again with the nine-year olds, ten-year olds and then latterly with six and seven years olds, it's been a great experience.

It has enriched me enormously and, most importantly, it's made me far more aware of the needs in the community and how perhaps I, and others who are similarly placed, can contribute. If not in person, then financially because many of these institutions are very underfunded. For example, there is very little music, very little drama. And, both of those activities so empower children, that it is absolutely essential that it becomes part of the primary school curriculum. I'm just sad that it doesn't matter how much money I offer to throw at it, it's going to be a grain of sand but if more people get involved, THEN we can make a difference.

